

Why Did Reform Judaism Change?

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Congregation B'nai Israel may be called a "Historic Reform Temple." I wonder, though, whether the phrase, "Historic Reform," isn't an oxymoron, like "serious comedy" or "kosher bacon." If a congregation is primarily "historic," it would resist "reform." The word "reform" means "change," and a constant process of change can get in the way of historic preservation. Being historic and Reform at the same time is not easy.

As a Reform congregation, though, this Temple has undergone significant changes over the years. For example, the magnificent crown on our center Torah scroll was a gift from Rabbi and Mrs. Jacob Gittleman, on the occasion of the Bar Mitzvah of their grandson, Richard Altheimer. Gege Altheimer has told me that her parents – her father was a Conservative Rabbi – made this special gift because they were so grateful that Rabbi Sanders permitted Richard to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah. In other words, Bar Mitzvah, now very popular, was once very rare here, as it was in most Reform congregations at the time, even prohibited in some places.

Another example: The bimah attire of Reform rabbis for many years did not include any ritual garb. Then, rabbis began wearing robes, and later the atarah was introduced, Judaizing the robes. Now, except on Holy Days, robes have disappeared. In fact, I asked a Classical Reform stalwart whether he thought my wearing a black robe would be welcome at our monthly Classical-style worship services, nights like tonight. He demurred: That era has passed.

Perhaps the most potent example is the kippah, otherwise known by its Yiddish name, yarmulke, the head covering that some Jews wear all the time, others particularly for worship.

Let me tell you a story from my own family and my home congregation in Houston. I was a college student, in the fall following a summer as a counselor at Greene Family Camp, the Texas answer to our own Henry S. Jacobs Camp. I learned that twin boys, who had been my campers, wished to don kippah and tallit at their upcoming B'nai Mitzvah. Their parents had approached the rabbi with the request, since such ritual garb was never seen in that congregation at the time. The rabbi referred the matter to the Ritual and Music Committee, which declined to permit the twins to wear those traditional symbols on the pulpit. In the immortal words of my maternal grandmother, who was a member of the Committee: "They can wear their yarmulkes if they like; Beth Yeshurun is right down the street." (Beth Yeshurun, of course, is the nearby Conservative synagogue.)

Then as now, I was not a kippah-wearer. It just isn't how I was raised, and the head covering doesn't resonate to me, as I know it does to others. At the same time, I was outraged by the Committee's decision. Reform, I argued, has always been about change – and even more, about individual autonomy. If we prohibit folks from observing a traditional ritual, we have created our own orthodoxy, with a small "o." You can guess how the story ends, I'm sure: Now, that congregation's Senior Rabbi wears a kippah on the bimah.

So what do I mean when I say that Reform Judaism "has always been about change?" Reform began in Germany. The first reforms were to synagogue ritual. Prayers were offered in the vernacular – German, in that case, in addition to Hebrew. Musical instruments were permitted – in those days, the organ, contemporary and popular at the time. "Family pews" were introduced, instead of men and women sitting separately.

To some degree, these changes were introduced because synagogues were threatened by conversion to Christianity. If Judaism did not keep up with the times, the early Reform rabbis feared, our people would be lost. At the same time, scholars began to discover that the way Judaism was practiced in the traditional synagogues of the day was not the way things had been, forever and always, as folks thought. In fact, research revealed that the ancient rabbis offered some prayers in Aramaic, the vernacular of the day. Further study showed that musical instruments were integral to worship in the ancient Temple. Indeed, though change had been neither swift nor intentional nor articulated, it had nevertheless been a constant across the broad sweep of Jewish history. In other words, the way that Judaism is practiced in ultra-Orthodox synagogues today is not the way our faith was practiced in the ancient Temple or by Hillel and Akiba, and certainly not by Moses himself. For the early Reform rabbis, the history of change was seen as permission for further development in the modern world, this time more swift and purposeful.

The reaction was as harsh as it was decisive. Traditional rabbis declared, "Innovation is prohibited by the Torah." Orthodox Judaism was established. Orthodox. Unchanging. Claiming against all evidence to be practicing Judaism the way it had always been, Orthodoxy was founded as a reaction to the advent of Reform Judaism. In other words, Reform came before Orthodox, which was set in stone in the style of pre-modern Europe.

Reform continued to change, now two centuries since those first synagogue reforms. In the late 19th Century, in this country, two parties fiercely battled for the soul of the American Judaism Isaac Mayer Wise was attempting to found when he established the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and its Hebrew Union College. Wise favored a more moderate reform, with the hope that all American Jews would unite under one umbrella. More radical reformers won out, though. They adopted a platform, in Pittsburgh, proclaiming "mosaic legislation," such as that regulating dress and diet, to be no longer meaningful to the modern Jew.

A half-century would pass before a new platform was adopted in 1937, with two more following in 1976 and 1999. Each successive statement has edged Reform Judaism toward broader acceptance of an array of ritual practices and more intimate embrace of the land and people of Israel.

In other words, lest anybody think otherwise, the Reform Judaism in which any one of us was raised was just that: The Reform Judaism of a particular moment in time, albeit an important one in our individual lives. But just as our music was different from our parents', and our children's music is different from ours, so has change been a constant in Reform Judaism, now and throughout its history.

Why did these changes occur? Changing demographics are always important, as are historical events. Members of Reform congregations today are made up of the descendants of multi-generation Reform Jews, but also of folks who were raised Orthodox or Conservative but now find greater meaning, or greater acceptance of their spouses, here. And, lest we forget, more than a few of our number were not raised Jewish at all, but have chosen Judaism for themselves, or have joined the fate if not the faith of the Jewish people through marriage. In our diverse congregation – no more or less diverse than others, by the way – different people bring their own histories and traditions, their own passions and proclivities. And together, we weave a tapestry we call "community."

Most importantly: No orthodoxy of Reform will appeal to the next generation. We must be nimble and adaptive; we must be authentically Jewish in word and in deed; and we must be open to change, as Reform Judaism has been from the beginning.

In a few weeks' time, on a night not designated as "Classical-style," I plan to speak about "the continuing blessings of Classical Reform Judaism." None of us should forget the magnificent legacy bequeathed to us by our founders, nor forsake the nuggets that retain their significant meaning in our own day. I am not giving that sermon tonight, because I do not "preach to the choir," as it were." To the extent we have a different congregation gathered for a Classical-style service than comes together for a Mishkan T'filah service, tonight's congregation needed to hear about the constant of change, while those who support contemporary worship need to celebrate what came before.

Change comes slowly in a historic congregation, and that is good. When too much change comes too quickly, those with historic ties to the congregation can genuinely feel disconnected from their own personal history. And yet, a failure to change at all would be a violation of the most basic principle of Reform Judaism.

Our brand of historic Judaism is Reform, not "reformed." We have not finished, nor will we ever conclude, the process of growth that makes our Judaism vibrant. Let us continue to be a congregation that values its members' historic ties to one another and to their temple. And let us remain also a Reform congregation, with innovative ritual practices, a diverse membership, and new ideas enriching our religious life with each passing season.

In tonight's Torah portion, we read of an abrupt change, surely dislocating for the people who tried to build that Tower in Babel. The change was to language, often the subject of our debates over worship style – how much in Hebrew, and how much in English. And yet, as I studied the portion this week with the young man who plans to read this portion when he becomes Bar Mitzvah next year, he told me that the lesson of the Tower of Babel is that we are all supposed to be different; God made us that way. Let us not be like those builders in Babel, mounting a monument to our own glory and our own taste. Instead, let Reform ever respond to the world that is, to the world that God created, with more than one language, with more than one way of reaching our God.

Amen.